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THE FORM AND FEELING OF LEONARD MICHAELS' JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE

Harrison Hall

Mentor: Nancy Berg

The conventional narrative to describe Jewish-American literature tracks a departure and possible return to a Jewish culture and heritage. However, the twentieth- to twenty-first century writer Leonard Michaels did not display such a shift. In the 1960s, his style evoked what he termed the “weird delirium” of a counter-culture in New York City. His early stories draw heavily on his onomatopoeic conception of the Yiddish language and describe cultural Jews living and fighting in Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Later in his life, Michaels adopted a simpler style and set his final collection, *The Nachman Stories*, in California. This change led some to criticize Michaels for abandoning literature more obviously aligned with mid-twentieth century Jewish-American experience. I first explicate Michaels’ tonal employment of postmodern performative prose, coupled with the Yiddish ethics implied in that theory, and then turn to *The Nachman Stories* to argue that Michaels reinterprets rather than abandons his personal understanding of Jewish literature. This arises from “feeling,” a word Michaels uses like the term “affect” to define both the saturation of passion in rhythmic prose and its notable lack in a paired down form. I additionally consider the Jewish practice of midrash to explicate how *The Nachman Stories* affect the reader by encouraging interpretive reading and introducing the potential for action, which ultimately lead to interpretive failure and inaction. I bring this literary figuration of Jewish philosophy and experience into conversation with reader-response and affect theorists Susan Sontag and Eve Sedgwick, Jewish-American writers Cynthia Ozick and Robert Alter, as well as the works of the Hasidic rabbi, Nachman of Bratslav, who similarly, though for more explicitly religious purposes, shifted his pedagogical style at the end of his life to tell seemingly simple moral fables that deny direct interpretation and create meaning through readers’ affective interactions with the texts.